

Whelan takes next step towards Olympic dream at FIG Worlds



By Jake Courtepatte

For an athlete of the world-class caliber of Aurora's Carmen Whelan, the physical and financial strains can be daunting. The 2017 Canadian National Champion in rhythmic gymnastics is appealing to the Aurora community as a whole to help her Olympic dreams come to fruition, after being chosen for Team Canada at both the 2018 FIG World Championships and 2018 Pan Am Championships in September.

Ranked in the top two in her craft in Canada for the past seven years, Whelan, who only turns twenty-years old on Friday, already has an impressive resume: she competed in the 2015 Pan Am Games in Toronto, as well as the 2015 and 2017 World Championships, and was named the Athlete of the Year by Sport Aurora in September of 2017.

Yet it is this year's Worlds, hosted in Sofia, Bulgaria, in mid-September, that represents Whelan's best opportunity to date to reach the world's biggest stage: which, she says, benefits the country as a whole.

"The World Championships are very important, not only an individual competition but a team event as well," said Whelan. "Our ranking will determine how many gymnasts Canada gets to send to the 2019 World Championships, which is the main Olympic Qualifying event."

Just ten days after the Worlds wraps up, Whelan will be travelling to Lima, Peru for the Pan American Gymnastics Championships, a five-day event that serves as a qualification for the 2019 Pan Am Games.

Those who have been following the longtime national team member's journey may remember Whelan as one of just two Canadian representatives in individual rhythmic gymnastics at the 2015 Pan Am Games, where she finished sixth in front of a hometown crowd.

Now, an older and more experienced Whelan has her sights set on reaching the podium when the Games return in 2019, also to be held in Lima.

Yet, in order to reach those lofty goals, Whelan said it "takes an entire community."

"Parents, family, friends, coaches, teammates, therapists: the list goes on! Without the help and support of my community I would not be where I am today."

Save for a small amount of funding from the Petro-Canada FACE Program, Whelan's journey has been an entirely self-funded one, responsible not only for her own expenses but that of her coach's as well. While her club, Silhouettes of York, has stepped in to help cover most of her coach's expenses as she enters the most challenging moment of her career, Whelan has set up a campaign page to raise funds to cover everything from flights and accommodations, to gym rentals, and training fees.

"Every little bit makes a difference."

Whelan will be looking for a top forty finish at this September's Worlds to qualify Team Canada for the 2019 tournament, while a top-three finish at the Pan Am Championships will give the team a spot in the 2019 Pan Am Games.

"I am willing to do whatever it takes to get there and the funds raised will go directly into helping me achieve these goals."

Whelan's campaign page can be found at www.makeachamp.com/carmenwhelan. There, contributions can be made in any

denomination, though the site uses a tiered system to reward contributors for larger donations, like a social media shout out, a postcard from Bulgaria, or a signed photo from Whelan.